The influence of attention and familiarity on the effects of music with prosocial lyrics (ESCOM, Ghent 2017)

Nicolas Ruth

Background
• Songs with prosocial lyrics affect people who listen to it (e.g. Greitemeyer, 2009; Ruth, 2017a; 2017b).
• Field studies showed that people in a café or restaurant show more prosocial behavior when exposed to songs with prosocial compared to neutral lyrics (Ruth, 2017).
• Other studies yielded that prosocial music increases prosocial cognition and empathy but decreases aggressive thoughts, feelings, and behavior (Greitemeyer, 2009).
• These studies are based on the General Learning Model (Buckley & Anderson, 2006) which postulates that personal and situational inputs lead to a certain internal state of a person which leads to an appraisal process and eventually to a certain behavior.
• So far, we cannot tell if it is the music, the lyrics or the knowledge we have about the songs that initiates the postulated process.
• Unfamiliar songs with prosocial lyrics might have an effect on the listener, too. Whereas a familiar song could affect us because of the knowledge we have about it even though we do not listen to the music with our full attention.

Hypotheses
H1: An attentive listener has more prosocial thoughts after listening to unknown music with prosocial lyrics than an inattentive listener.
H2: An attentive listener shows more empathy after listening to unknown music with prosocial lyrics than an inattentive listener.
H3: An attentive listener behave in a more prosocial way after listening to unknown music with prosocial lyrics than an inattentive listener.
H4: Attentive and inattentive listeners will show no differences in their reaction to known music with prosocial lyrics.

Method
• Online-based experimental 2x2 between-subject design
• 138 German participants (M = 26 years old, SD = 8.2; 58.7% female).
• Procedure: The participants were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions. In two groups the listeners were distracted by a mathematical task while there was no other task than listening in the other conditions. One distracted and one attentive group listened to two familiar songs with prosocial lyrics (1 German, 1 English song) while the other groups listened to comparable unfamiliar ones (see figure 1). The songs used were evaluated in a pilot study (N = 41). After listening to the songs the participants were asked to answer a standardized questionnaire.
• Measurement:
  ⇒ Prosocial thoughts: Word completion task (Mügge, 2014).
  ⇒ State empathy: FEPAA-E (Lukesch, 2006).
  ⇒ Prosocial behavior: Participants’ willingness to donate parts of their incentives to a charity project.

Results
H1: Familiarity and attention have main effects on prosocial thoughts (Fattentive(1,137) = 4.03, p < .05, η² = .03; Ffamiliarity(1,137) = 7.11, p < .01, η² = .05). ✅
H2: Familiarity and attention have main effects on state empathy (Fattentive(1,137) = 9.07, p < .01, η² = .06; Ffamiliarity(1,137) = 4.02, p < .05, η² = .03). ✅
H3+4: An interaction for familiarity and attention on prosocial behavior, F(1,137) = 7.62, p < .01, η² = .05, and a main effect for familiarity were found, F(1,137) = 4.47, p < .05, η² = .03. ✅

Conclusion
• Based on the results, it can be concluded that familiarity of prosocial songs is substantial for the investigated effects, especially when we listen to the music inattentively.
• It seems reasonable that it is not only the music or the lyrics that trigger the postulated process but also information, associations and knowledge we have with the familiar music.
• Additionally, there was an effect of unfamiliar music with prosocial lyrics. This indicates that unfamiliar music and messages can initiate a process and lead to a prosocial behavior, too.

References
• Ruth, N. (2017b). “They don’t really care...”: Effects of music with prosocial content and corresponding media coverage on prosocial behavior. Musicae Scientiae, online first.